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Jeanette Winterson: 'Paper' Interrogating Masculinity with Violence

Jeanette Winterson is known for the way she questions gender categories and confounds expectations of the feminine, from Villanelle's active swashbuckling to the Dog Woman's casual violence, from the unknown narrator of *Written on the Body* who rejects gendered identity to the fluid interplay of the narrator of *The PowerBook* shuffling between masculine and feminine via the engorged tulip, Winterson is someone we look to for texts that can unpack gender stereotypes. Her self-reflexive post modern texts deconstruct the divisions between masculinity and femininity.

However, I have begun to question if this is true of femininity alone, and whether her representations of masculinity are more fixed and less fluid. Are the same problematising, teasing, and playful unpacking accorded to her male characters? And, if so, is it the same explorative approach in the nineteen-eighties, with the dialogic male and female narrators bouncing off each other, with their famous feminised male characters Henri and Jordan, apparent in the nineteen-nineties texts constructed as love triangles? The masculine voices of Jove and Handel appear negative as they use various aspects of violence and cutting of the female body to alienate the reader. I had been using Tim Edwards's chapter 'Violence and violation: men, masculinity and power' from his 2006 *Cultures of Masculinity*, in my gender course for a while and thinking about the trope of violence as Winterson uses it sharpened my interrogation of her male characters and her representations of masculinity. Is the issue of masculinity and aggression treated differently in the two decades and how much might this be linked to issues of narrative form? A narrative strategy that I could posit as a duality in the eighties where

the masculine, as the opposing binary, is equally deconstructed in contrast to an either/or choice of the nineties, where the masculine becomes the negated to the embracing of lesbian desire?

Tim Edwards argues that aggression is a longstanding cultural marker for masculinity and this is borne out by the way violence is seen as an essential part of masculine identity; the courts are full of men who hit, punch and even kill, while men who are unable to protect themselves physically are constructed as sissies or 'girls'. If violence is masculine, Edwards poses, does that then mean that masculinity is of itself violent? He surveys the literature on the subject, pointing out that violence can be psychic and emotional as well as physical and concludes that, while men do perform more violent acts, this is linked to acculturation and suggests further that forcing men to performing masculinity and hence violence become of itself a form of violation for some men's psyche. One can extrapolate from Edwards's sociological survey, in relation to reading Winterson's utilization of the trope of violence.

Winterson deconstructs the question, 'is Violence masculine?'. through the Dog Woman's maiming and killing of puritans in *Sexing the Cherry* and Inge's blowing up of men's urinals in *Written on the Body*, to complicate the stereotyping. While Edwards places women being violent as un-feminine and hence in some form masculine, Winterson uses the trope to unpack the gendered expectation of the act with a playful humour. Women being violent confound the concept of the feminine and expand it beyond the accepted and the comfortable. Rather than construct women aberrantly performing masculinity, Winterson explodes femininity to encompass both activity and

aggression. But is the same true of the male characters? Every text from *The Passion* onwards, appears to have a backdrop of male violence against women, which appears to play right into the stereotypes of masculinity.

Throughout the texts, secondary male characters abuse women and, the physical abuse is linked to sexual abuse. Almost every text includes at least one scene in a brothel, where men abuse women. The Cook, in *The Passion*, habitually slaps women around, sells Villanelle to Napoleon's army brothel, and rapes her. Villanelle's response is that 'Men are violent. That's all there is to it.' (P 109) Rosemergy argues the masculine role of aggression is fixed in this text.. Sexing *the Cherry* has some of the husbands of the eleven dancing princesses enact emotional and physical abuse, from chaining their wives to parading their mistresses, they maim and kill their wife's lovers but, it has to be acknowledged that as many of the princesses kill their husbands in their rejection of patriarchal marriage as a happy ending. *Sexing the Cherry* asserts the violence of male patriarchy but contests the gender binary of female passivity through its active and violent women. Again, I would argue the focus is on the feminine, and the assumption of male sexualised aggression is uncontested. *Written on the Body* the first love-triangle narrative, is slightly different since the husband, while negative, is masochistic in his sexual preferences rather than sadistic, and is not physically violent. However, as Edwards argues, not all violence is physical and the enormity of the husband's emotional passive-aggressive lies remain the most horrific of the narrative 'crimes'.

From *Art and Lies*, the male abuse of women becomes more strident and unnegotiated. Picasso's brother is violently incestuous, 'my brother used

me, night after night, as a cesspit for his bloated adolescence' (A&L 42). 'He had twice broken my wrists, once broken my hip and ...fractured my collarbone.' (A&L 156) This physical violence is linked to the sexual abuse through the concept of ownership, 'I was his liege-land' and linked to the penis, 'my body was, what had Matthew called it, a weapon rest.' (A&L 156) Her father, the sadistic rapist, completes his emotional violence by pushing her over the roof to keep her from revealing the family abuse. In *Gut Symmetries*, Jove smashes his wife's head in to stop her talking and eats slices from his wife's buttocks while she is still alive.

I made the cut so carefully. I made it like a surgeon not a butcher. My knife was as sharp as a laser. I did it with dignity, hungry though I was. I did it so that it would not have disgusted either of us. She was my wife. I was her husband. We were one flesh....

I parted the flesh from the bone and I ate it. (GS 96)

In *PowerBook*, the husband is no more than a threatening cipher, but the virtual male protagonists exhibit aspects of aggression, from the Captain, the pirates, Lancelot slaughtering men for Guinevere and Francesca de Rimini's husband's spiking his wife with a metal glove.

What is particularly notable in these later texts is the additional representation of the men parading their penises as the badge of their identity. Alice's father shows his wife his penis, on their wedding night though he does not consummate the marriage. When not in control of his wife and his lover, Jove brags about the size of his penis, 'he is big enough for the both of us. When he says this he can't help smirking down towards his centre. Like most men he is obsessed by the size of his member.' (GS 131). The Sea

Captain in *PowerBook* 'pissed extravagantly overboard' (*P* 15), the Pirate spares the disguised Ali's life because of an apparent concern for her penis, 'He pulled out his own cock and held it under Ali's nose. "This is treasure"' (*P* 18-9). The texts make clear links between the violence of the masculine and the owning of, and pride in, the phallus. Power and violence, particularly sexual aggression is being accrued to the phallogentric aspects of the male characters in a way that is both alienating and, at times, mocking but much less challenging than Winterson's usual take on gender expectations. These violent male characters become more strident and central in the nineties, but are present in the eighties as well. Indeed, taken on their own, one would have to argue across Winterson's oeuvre for an unreconstructed radical feminist strategy similar to that of Dworkin and McKinnon in relation to men and violence and one that Edwards tries to question in relation to structures of masculinity. Of course one could argue for a metaphoric attack on the phallogentric, as Lorna Sage does, but how do these representations position the reader who is male and / or masculine? Reviewers such as Peter Kemp and Philip Henshaw and the critic Christy Burns have denoted their alienation from these bald and 'sexist' stereotypes (Kemp: 'graffiti of gender spite').

However, the texts of course contain more complex representations of masculinity than this template allows. The trope of violence is employed with a different trajectory in the two decades. In both *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry*, the lack of violence becomes a fundamental part of how both Henri and Jordon perform a masculinity that is comfortable to their given natures. The lack is deliberately highlighted in both texts: Henri is contrasted to the soldiers' brutal behaviour, and Jordan is contrasted to the Dog Woman. But is

it quite true to suggest that Henri is the feminised man who cannot kill a rabbit and spends eight years in battle without harming a man, as Paulina Palmer and many others do? Despite this portrayal, his assumption of violence within his identity is there from the beginning, when he first witnesses the Cook slapping the camp prostitute. 'I wanted to go to him and ram his face in the blanket until he had no breath left.' (P 14-15) He does not act on this impulse just as he is unable to have sex with his camp prostitute but clearly in some sense assumes that both heterosexual desire and violence are markers of the masculine. And, of course, Henri does finally become violent by killing the cook, but in enacting aggression he damages his psyche. In Edwards's thesis he violates himself in enacting violent masculinity. Both Villanelle and the lawyer call him insane for his desire to see if the cook has a heart, and the text is graphic about this violence:

I had the knife in my hand and I thrust it at his side. As he rolled I thrust it in his belly. I heard it suckle his guts. I pulled it out, angry knife at being so torn away, and I let it go in again, through the years of good living. (P 128).

The dissociation apparent in the knife becoming equally active in the murder is belied by his claim that 'I stood up, not unsteady at all'. While Villanelle cries for the first time (a cultural marker of femininity)¹, Henri asserts his firmness but his enactment of a positive male aggression is instantly challenged as he searches to see if the cook (like Villanelle) lacks a heart.. Henri's disturbed sense of reality fails him but it is true that his self-violation,

¹ *Written on the Body* asexualises the narrator by creating him/her both physically violent and enjoying the power of expressing anger but subsequently cries at the ugliness of the behaviour, horrified and ashamed of the behaviour. (cf p.186 with Jacqueline and p.170-4 with Elgin.) Winterson here seems to utilise violence as a marker of masculinity and its lack for femininity as part of the narrator's confusion of gendered identity.

his shift into insanity comes directly from his enacting of the trope of violence.'[I]f masculinity is connected with, or even dependent on, the internalisation and expression of violence then does masculinity necessarily also lead to the violation of men themselves?' (Edwards 60). Edwards allows us to see how Winterson uses violence to unpack a particular machismo masculinity and the appalling pressures incumbent in its performance.. The violation of Henri's psyche is total, as his self-incarceration in San Servolo, Venice's prison for the insane bears witness. It is Villanelle who underlines how violence can be a violation: 'Henri is a gentle man and I wonder if it was killing that fat cook that hurt his mind?' (P 147).

If the trope of violence in relation to masculinity is explored by Henri and a differing, gentler masculinity posed in *The Passion* in 1987, then the character of Handel problematises both the uses of violence and what constitutes masculinity even further, in *Art and Lies* published in 1994. And, with Handel, you can see that my neat modelling of the differences between masculinity in the eighties and the nineties begins to come undone to some extent, though the question of narrative sympathy does not.. Handel, the priest-doctor ascetic performs mastectomies in *Art and Lies*, conforming to a misogynist world while yet apart from it, and interrogating it because of the incision in his own reproductive organ. The eunuch who both possesses a functioning penis and performs physically violent acts on women, is a much more ambiguous characterisation that allows both a excoriating portrayal of the misogyny inherent in the general ruling cultures and the Catholic church and a complication of gender dualities. Interestingly for me, this is still played out through the narrative trope of violence.

But how much does it affect our initial reading of Handel's relation to surgical violence on women that we do not learn of his castration until the end of the novel? For much of the process of reading *Art and Lies* we have a simpler view. Handel is an ascetic, cold man, displaying an alternative masculinity to the other sexually violent men. Distrusting his own senses he

becomes celibate like Henri: 'For myself, I prefer to hold my desires just out of reach of appetite, to keep myself honed and sharp. I want the keen edge of longing.' (A&L 7) Handel's self becomes the metonymy of the knife he wields as a successful surgeon 'We were the ones in ritual gloves and masks carrying the sacred surgical steel. .. they were grateful to me for throwing their tits into the incinerator.' (A&L 8). This brutal representation of his doctoring is followed immediately by the acknowledgement that such surgery was not medically necessary, 'We don't do it any more...we regret that we did it so much' ((A&L 8) and the trip to the brothel linked to the surgery by the jocular "get your rubbers on." The rallying cry of the operating theatre was the jest of the brothel.' (A&L 9). Handel may not have sex with women, but he still violates them. The text is clearly setting up mastectomy as a further abuse of women, compounded by Handel's voyeurism, 'I like to look at women' ((A&L 9) his leaving the Church to become a surgeon to indulge this predilection, and his dressing them in the silk dressing-gown sporting his initials implies a form of ownership. The text is explicit about his fondling of the breasts, with his 'thumb on her nipple, I smiled.' (A&L 10) and that the procedure 'did a lot of damage but it will be impossible to prove' (A&L 10). Handel's first sequence concludes with an insistence on the physical violence the women suffer: 'The patient can hear everything under a general anaesthetic. The ripping, snipping, severing, squelching, dripping operation' (A&L 11). Violence here is institutional and medical, but it is no accident that Handel cuts a part of the body that signifies femininity, the breast.

It is only in the final section, that the knife-wielding, socially-protected man who has unpacked and embodied masculinity as a misogynistic abuse of the female body for financial and emotional gain, synonymous with 'power and violence' begins to dissociate himself from his construction of the cultures of masculinity, brutish and excessive, and to construct a differing, othered masculinity itself the victim of a cutting, a 'small incision'.. Whereas in other texts, Winterson has concentrated queer representations on the feminine, here she explores a queer representation of masculinity alongside Sappho's queer femininity, the poet as hermaphrodite. Patricia Duncker usefully contextualises Handel as one of a number of castrato figures being explored by queer theory in the 1990s. Where Ruggiero, like Jordan,

masquerades in a woman's dress to explore his feminine side, Handel explicates what constitutes masculinity if one is male, has a functioning penis and yet is a eunuch. 'Queer undermines fixed, settled heterosexual discourses. The binary opposition between masculinity and femininity is fluid and unstable' (Duncker 85) Handel acknowledges the performativity of masculinity, a form of parroting of learned cultural expectations and prescripts:

How much of your thinking has been thought for you by someone else?

Speak Parrot!

What kind of parrot am I?

.... we are what we have been taught...I am made up of other people's say so, veins of tradition, a particular kind of education, borrowed methods that have disguised themselves as personal habits.

I know that what I am is quite the opposite of an individual. (A&L 184)

Like Judith Butler, Handel argues for a negotiation between the determined and the arbitrary gendered self and, unlike the acceptance of the other men in the text, he suggests an alternative performance: 'But if the parrot is to speak, let him be taught by a singing master...I am an old bird who has tried to choose his stuffing' (A&L 184-5) His ability to dissociate from cultures of masculinity is explained in relation to his own seduction by the aged Cardinal desiring of the castrato, a man with breasts – the very things Handel severs from women. The Cardinal, like Sappho, strives to meld the genders and sexualities,

Woman had been taken out of man. Why not put her back into man?

Return to a man his femininity and the problem of Woman disappears.

The perfect man. Male and Female He created him. (A&L 195-6)

The text makes clear the misogyny of the Cardinal's queering artifice as Handel resists the frame of paedophile's victim to assert a happiness and a pleasure in the odd relationship, linking the creation of his sexuality to art, surgery to artifice. He explicates men's dislike of women: 'a body-loathing, woman-despising Church has found it convenient to place all that is sinful in the excesses of the flesh' (A&L 118). However, masculine excess of the flesh is no indicator of a love of women either,

Don Giovanni; the unsheathed cock is layered to numbness... Sex

gives him no pleasure, only power and violence pleases him, that is not the mark of the brute, it is the mark of Man. (A&L 118)

Having reinforced masculinity as power, violence, particularly sexual violence against women, the text moves onto D H Lawrence to separate the owning of a phallus from value: 'surely a phallus is only divine when it is strapped on to a god? Does the god make the phallus or does the phallus make the god?' (A&L 121). Handel is a strange amalgam, as Ducker identifies, of queer theory and radical feminism and his characterisation strives to disrupt the binary gender codes by refusing to accommodate them while simultaneously asserting the aggression and violation of masculinity. While this works for Ducker, in asserting the importance of politics, I find the representation more conflicted.

Can we read Handel as the work of art embodying the two sexes, as a queering of masculinity when we already know of a career of pruning women's breasts? The trope of violence, which the text embodies as masculine and phallogocentric links his 'small but decisive incision' to his regretful practice of the 'binfuls of breasts' (A&L188)? Handel is a product of a misogynistic church and surgery. His form of queer construction built from a violent wielding of a knife on the willing victim is something very different from the life affirming and life saving Sappho or Doll's bawdy wielding of the dildo. While, like Henri, the trope of violence is used to unpack what constitutes masculinity and to affirm a variety of differing masculinities, and here to also query the centrality of the potent phallus, the use of violence in this nineties novel continues to affirm a certain learnt, parroting of masculine domination.

The final question I need to ask is, how does the complex of representations of men function within the texts? We have the characters that problematise masculinity, like Henri, Jordan, Handel or Stella's father in *Gut Symmetries* positioned alongside the more unreconstructed characterisations, the cook, Picasso's brother and father and Jove. These variant kinds of characterisation circulate within the same text but how do they function in relation to each other? How do we read what Edwards would see as the sexist essentialism of male violence alongside the queering of masculinity? Does the variety invoke a range of reactions and a dialogue between them to create an assertion of the diversity of masculinities? Is the plurality of

conflicting representations attempting a deconstruction of the male gendered acculturation? To answer this, I need to return once again to my divide between the decades. I think the trope of violence does interrogate the cultures of masculinity positively, in *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry*. Henri contests and finally eradicates the cook's version of masculinity while simultaneously explicating the self-damage implicit in performing gendered acculturation. However, I read less diversity in *Art and Lies*, *Gut Symmetry* and to some extent, *The PowerBook*. With Handel, the trope of surgical violence allied to masculine queering remains the negated binary to the more joyful feminine queer characterisations rooted in the arts of poetry and painting. That this has a partial link to the narrative form of the texts, dialogue or triangular is in some sense true, but this is not the only answer. As examining the trope of violence in relation to masculinity makes apparent, while the eighties novels use the trope of violence to interrogate masculinity, the nineties novels assert more problematically that 'power and violence...is the mark of Man.'

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